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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of how children's expectations for their own school performance develop over their first-grade year and what factors influence these expectations. Expectations for performance in reading and arithmetic were studied. Both middle class and lower class (black and white) children have higher expectations than their subsequent marks warrant, but the discrepancy is much greater for lower class children. These expectations are remarkably resistant to change over the first-grade year, but the limited evidence now available suggests that expectations are modified to conform with marks rather than the reverse. (Author/CS)

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Abstract

Middle-Class and Lower-Class Children: Expectations in First Grade

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This research studies how children's expectations for their own school performance develop over their first-grade year and what factors influence these expectations. Mainly expectations for performance in reading and arithmetic are studied. Both middle-class and lower-class (black and white) children have higher expectations than their subsequent marks warrant, but the discrepancy is much greater for lower class. These expectations are remarkably resistant to change over the first-grade year, but the limited evidence now available suggests that expectations are modified to conform with marks rather than the reverse.

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Middle Class and Lower Class Children: Expectations in First Grade

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Several Pygmalion studies (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Brophy & Good, 1970) in recent years confirm that teachers' expectations for students are potent determiners of students' actual performance, thus documenting in educational settings a phenomenon more generally known as "the self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton, 1957). In all the Pygmalion studies to date, children's expectations for themselves, although by presumption the mediating variable between teachers' expectations and pupils' performances, are not directly studied. Some other research of ours addresses experimentally and directly the issue of changing childrens' expectations for themselves (Entwisle & Webster, 1972, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c). The research reported here is another facet of the work on children's expectations. It inquires into the natural origin of children's expectations, and is a study, over time, of how children's expectations develop.

This research focuses directly on children's expectations (the presumed target of the Pygmalion studies), hopefully catching expectations in their earliest formative stages. How do children develop notions of themselves and their abilities? How accurate are these notions? Is it true, as some have speculated, that once a child's expectations for himself crystallize, it is difficult thereafter to change them? So far as we know, no one has tried to follow young children, from the time they enter school, to see what persons serve to shape a child's expectations, although frequently research with older children employs "expectations" as a variable.

Recently (see e.g. Rosenberg & Simmons, 1971) different self-concepts or levels of self-esteem have been noted for black children and white children at third grade and higher levels. For this and other reasons, we are following two cohorts of children, one white middle class, the other lower class including both black children and white children, from the time they enter school.

Procedure. First-grade children were interviewed before they got their first report card to see how well they expected to do in reading, arithmetic, and conduct. Later the children were reinterviewed, just before the end of first grade, to see how intervening events, like receipt of report cards, had affected their expectations. Other data secured from the children included sociometric rankings within the class, level of self-esteem, IQ level. Some parental and teacher data were obtained from questionnaires. Space permits only a selective review of a few of the cross-tabulations and regressions carried out with the data so far.

Children's expectations were assessed by asking them to "guess what your report card will look like." A heavy plastic sheet (approximately 3' X 4') duplicated that part of a primary level report card where reading, arithmetic, and conduct are rated. Several large cards with 1's, 2's, 3's, and 4's, were prepared to fit into blocks labelled "READING," "ARITHMETIC," and "CONDUCT."

Children were interviewed individually and privately. They were told that we wanted them to "play a guessing game" to guess what their report card would look like. On first interview great care was taken to ensure that 1) the child knew what a report card was, 2) the child knew that report cards are evaluative instruments, and 3) the child knew what "reading," "arithmetic," and "conduct," and the numerical ratings used for marks, meant.

The entire first grades at two very different elementary schools in Baltimore were studied. One cohort, from a suburban all-white elementary school in a middle-class neighborhood, began first grade in the fall of 1971. The other cohort, from an urban integrated school (60% black) in a lower-class neighborhood, began first grade in the fall of 1972. The number of subjects varies in both cohorts, due to attrition as children move in or out.

Results

What Do Children Expect Before the First Report Card? Children in both schools expect to do exceedingly well. Middle-class children (N=80) have almost

exactly the same expectation for reading, arithmetic, and conduct, averaging about B+ in each area. Lower-class children (N=108) are even more optimistic than middle-class children about reading and conduct in looking for A's, but somewhat less optimistic about arithmetic. Put another way, 60% of suburban children and 73% of lower-class children expect A's in reading. Suburban children have exactly the same high hopes for an A in arithmetic, while lower-class children are more modest in their hopes for arithmetic. When the lower-class group is further subdivided by race (two-thirds of the lower-class group is black) there is no difference by race in the reported expectations.

Do Teachers' Marks Agree with Children's Expectations? First of all, the bases on which teachers assign marks, and the average marks awarded, are different in the two schools. In the suburban school teachers are supposed to rate the child individually, without reference to the rest of the class. In the integrated school, grading is "in terms of his progress in reaching standards...considered appropriate for his age." (Quoted from explanatory section on report card.)

To treat marks numerically they have been converted to a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 high.

Reading. About 66% of the middle-class children receive something other than what they expect. Of this 66%, 41% do worse than they had hoped. But all the children who feared the worst (7%) (i.e. getting the lowest grade), do better than they expected, because the teacher does not give any grades at all in the lowest categ

The teachers in the lower-class school are "hard" markers. On the first report card almost half the marks given (43%) are 3's and 4's, whereas 75% of the children expected a 1. The lack of concordance between expectations and marks received is highly significant ($\chi_1^2 = 22.32$, $p < .01$).

The reading grades given at the first marking period have the same distribution for black children and for white children. At the end of first grade, however, white children get more 2's and fewer 4's, and this racial difference in marks received exceeds chance expectations ($\chi_2^2 = 6.24$, $p < .05$, $N = 125$).

Arithmetic. For middle-class children (N=82), who in general are slightly more optimistic about arithmetic than about reading, the first mark must have been disappointing. Teachers are noticeably less generous with 1's in arithmetic than they are in reading (2% vs. 34%). Over 44% of the children do not do as well as they hoped. Only a third get exactly what they expect.

Teachers in the lower-class school mark as hard in arithmetic as they do in reading. Only one quarter of the students get 2's, one child gets a 1 and almost 30% get 4's. There is a tendency, not significant, toward a racial bias in marks, with lower marks going to blacks.

At the end of the first year, there is a suggestion of unevenness of marks by race (like that in reading) with whites getting more of the high marks than blacks. The trend does not attain significance, however.

By the End of First Grade Have Expectations Changed?

Reading. Middle-class children register some mild gains in expectations over the first-grade year. At the end of the year 6% more A's and 5% more B's are expected and fewer children (11%) expect low grades. At the end of the year only 3 children (out of 85) look for poor grades, whereas 12 at the end of the first semester looked for low grades.

Lower-class children have almost identical distributions of expectations at the end of the first and second semesters of their first grade year, 68% of the childr giving the same responses both times. Of the 20% who change their response from one time point to the next, 10% increase and 10% decrease. The change over time is equivalent in both directions.

Arithmetic. Middle-class children's expectations rise somewhat over the first-grade year. Whereas 76% expect A's or B's at the end of the first semester, more (87%) look for A's and B's at the end of the year. The picture for arithmetic looks very much like the picture for reading for middle-class children.

Lower-class children's expectations for arithmetic show less consistency over time than their expectations for reading. Only 42% agree from one point to the

next. Again, the number of children whose expectations rise is exactly the same as the number whose expectations fall--29%. Those falling, however, show some sharp declines, declines of more than one unit on the scale. Whereas only 3 children expected a "C" at the end of the first semester, by the end of first grade 11 look for "C" and 3 look for an even lower grade.

What is the Relation of the First Report Card on Later Expectations?

Reading. There is a surprising lack of consistency between what the middle-class child expects at the end of grade one and his mark earlier in the year in reading. Less than 50% of the children expect again the mark they earlier received. This asymmetry is almost all in an optimistic direction since about 88% of the marks handed out were 1's and 2's. If teachers were to conform to students' hopes, they would have to award almost everyone an A. They had awarded 33% A's earlier and at the end of first grade 41% more students expect an A!

As noted above, the gap between lower-class children's expectations and grades received is larger than the gap for middle-class children. Nevertheless lower-class children's expectations in reading are not dampened following a low mark. At the end of first grade almost 75% of children look for a 1 (A) even though none received a 1 earlier. Only 9% look for the two lower grades (3's and 4's) even though 70% had earlier received such grades. The lack of "reality testing" shows some differences by race--no blacks expect lower grades and 93% expect higher.

Arithmetic. Middle-class children show less correspondence between their hopes at the end of first grade and their earlier mark in arithmetic than is the case for reading. Again, however, the discrepancy between hopes and earlier marks is in an optimistic direction (almost significant, $\chi^2 = 3.44$, $p \cong .10$). There is a certain spread here though, not seen for reading. Quite a few who earlier received 2's (18%) now expect 3's and even 4's.

Lower-class children's expectations in arithmetic are not dampened following receipt of a low mark. Over 41% of those who received low marks (3's and 4's) continue to look for 1's at the end of the year. Only 6% expect to get a lower mark, while 74% expect a higher mark than that they received earlier. The racial breakdown again suggests a tendency for blacks to be even less "reality conscious" than whites.

Discussion

The data suggest that first-grade children are optimistic, in most cases unrealistically optimistic, about the likelihood of success in school. The hopes of the lower-class children furthermore are much less likely to be confirmed than the hopes of the middle-class children because (1) their hopes are relatively higher, and also because (2) the teachers' distributions of marks are much lower in the lower-class school. The averages of first marks given in reading and arithmetic are 1.69 and 1.66 respectively in the middle-class school, and 3.15 and 3.03 in the lower-class school (where A = 1). Grades in both schools show no relation to tested IQ. If children are divided into groups above and below the median, equal numbers in each group get 1's, 2's, and 3's! Children in the integrated school have average IQ's a few points below 100; children in the middle-class school average about 110.

In this preliminary and limited report, the early school experiences of children differ by social class, and tentative differences by race are beginning to surface.

Teachers' expectations and evaluations early in the school career apparently do little to dampen children's hopes. As time progresses, however, there must be some rapproachment. What is the causal ordering? If a child has high expectations do his marks tend to improve, or do his expectations tend to diminish to agree with the marks he receives? The data now in hand, although insufficient to settle the question completely, indicate that expectations begin to adjust themselves to be consonant with marks, rather than that high expectations, if clung to, are followed by high grades. The same children will be traced through second grade to answer this question more precisely.